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ABSTRACT

A major component of Adlerian psychology concerns the belief in responsibility to self and others. In both incest perpetrator and spouse the basic underlying assumption of responsibility to self and others is often not present. Activities and behaviors occur in a social context and as such need to be regarded within a social context that may serve to help understand behaviors. The role of the spouse in incest has been variously described as "enabling" and "non-supportive." Incest is at once catastrophic to the victim, devastating to sibling bystanders, incapacitating to the spouse, and damaging to the perpetrator. The need for further attention to spousal dynamics in incest is overdue: the victim and perpetrator have claimed the most attention to the neglect of the spouse and her role. Spouses are often awarded sole custody of incested children and while the perpetrator may be removed from the home due to legal action, or serve time in a prison setting, the spouse remains in the home. To remove the proximal cause of incest is not sufficient to guarantee the future safety of the victim. Spousal dynamics need examination and attention to prevent further, subsequent re-incesting of the victim, or a perpetuation of the dynamics that could lead to younger siblings being victimized. (ABL)

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The Spouse and Familial Incest: An Adlerian Perspective

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Abstract

This brief presentation will describe the role the spouse plays in incest and how it can affect the family. The marital, or nominal, spouse of an incest perpetrator has a unique private life that will be explored. Common rationalizations employed by spouses will also be examined. Motivations to seek, and continue, treatments are commonly sought by the spouse with the professed goal of reuniting the family.

Incest in a family affects all participants, including bystanders. The spouse has often been overlooked regarding her role and how it may have an impact on treatment outcomes. The spouse is often blamed for "not telling" sooner or for not supporting the victim. Reasons' spouses often maintain contact with the perpetrator to the neglect of their child, or children, will be examined and Adlerian techniques for working with the family will be suggested. Suggestions for further research will also be offered for consideration.

The Spouse and Familial Incest: An Adlerian Perspective

Safety for children is a topic that has assumed increasing prominence in American society. The public is often reminded of the necessity for concern and careful selection of daycare facilities for children, thoroughness in the selection of youth activity directors, careful vetting for teachers of children, and increased alertness to strangers in a child's environment. Of equal concern, although often overlooked is the safety a child may, or may not, experience at home.

Incest happens in the best, as well as the worst, home environments. Like any other virulent pathogen it is no respector of family income, social status, educational level, race, or religious preference. The spouse and how she may function in the development, occurrence, maintenance, denial, and recovery from incest have not been adequately addressed in current literature. The majority of statistics represent that not all incest perpetrators are male. Females do incest sons, or younger male siblings, but occurrence of such statistics represents a minority. For the purposes of this discussion this population will not be addressed. Attention will be focused on male perpetrators which incest within the confines of their family, whether natural or blended, within a relationship that may, or may not, exist due to a legal marriage.

Incest and the Spouse: Doubting a Child's Reality

A major component of Adlerian psychology concerns the belief in responsibility to self and others. In both perpetrator and spouse the basic underlying assumption of responsibility to self and others is often not present. A person is a social being by nature, by upbringing, and by preference. Activities and behaviors occur in a social context and as such need to be regarded within a social context that may serve to help understand behaviors.

A perpetrator of incest may be father, step-father, grandfather, uncle, older brother, mother's boyfriend, or close family friend. A spouse may be the natural mother, step-mother, or girlfriend. Perpetrator and spouse are engaged in a relationship that has import for the entire family.

The role of the spouse in incest has variously been described as "enabling" and "non-supportive." A spouse may appear to an observer to have autonomy in choosing to protect an incested child. In reality, a spouse may not perceive that she has choices, including the protection of a minor. Her passivity incorporates a view of life that may not contribute to the protection, defense, or admission of incest within a family context. She may be cognizant of the on-going damage to family members, including the perpetrator, and yet be unwilling to take action. She may be non supportive of the victim both emotionally and physically. She may

deny that incest is occurring even if presented with a direct view of the activity. She may refuse and oppose removal of the perpetrator from the home. She may yield custody of the child in exchange for the perpetrator and his continued presence in the home. She may refuse therapeutic efforts even when court-referred. She may actively sabotage therapy and jeopardize treatment success.

Spouses and Rationalizations: Cheap at any price----passive pearls

The private life of the spouse typically includes low feelings of competence, self-esteem, and questionable belief in her own ability to survive without the support of an identified other person in charge. Operating from a mistaken goal of inadequacy the spouse has been de-empowered, de-encouraged, and de-supported in her attempts to meet the challenges of life. A majority of spouses may be hypothesized to be victims of childhood sexual abuse themselves. It may be seen that spouses have embraced a lifestyle that values membership in a relationship----any relationship, even if abusive. The abuse inherent in such a relationship may be emotional, sexual, or physical and extend not only to the spouse but also to her children. Modeling by parents may have presented to the spouse the mistaken belief that abuses are inherent in relationships and must be endured.

The price to be paid by such a passive pearl may include the sacrifice of her child's safety for her relationship. Should she be willing to

believe a child who suggests that incest is occurring, what would be lost? To a spouse who believes herself to be incompetent, or inadequate, in life tasks the risk may be too great to take. Some common rationalizations offered by spouses include:

I can't do it without him. . .

I'm not good enough or competent enough to make decisions like. .

. I'm too scared to . . .

He's not that bad. . .

It's my fault. . .

If only I was better, then. . .

Remotivation and reorganization: a chance for a change

Spouses, as well as other family members, can benefit greatly from the milieu offered by a group setting. Group therapy affords member's opportunities to understand their lifestyle and to explore beliefs, motives, mistaken goals, and self-defeating behaviors. Problems are explored with alternatives, the possibility of change is introduced, and insight is encouraged to be translated into action.

Group therapy provides the spouse with tools she can use to reorganize her life and the life of her child, or children. Reorientation of the lifestyle allows for acquisition and utilization of previously unknown capabilities, to include: problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, attitudinal changes, and lifestyle choices. Techniques of particular use to

therapists in group practice addressing issues of incest include confrontation, interpretation, modeling, acting "as if," and role-playing. An underlying premise in the Adlerian perspective is that people yearn for significance. The group therapeutic process offers a platform from which members can better understand the ways they seek meaning in their lives.

Further research: mandate for action

Incest is a topic that has assumed increasing visibility within the last two decades in the United States. The time during the 1960's and the sexual revolution of the 1970's combined to increase public awareness, and acceptance, of sexual information, behavior, and choices. Incest is a topic that has emerged from one not discussed by many to one often presented to the family by way of TV in the living room. Incest is a topic seen in prime time movies, national best selling books, national and community based groups, and is discussed by movie stars and the son of a president.

Incest is at once catastrophic to the victim, devastating to sibling bystanders, incapacitating to the spouse, and damaging to the perpetrator. The need for further attention to spousal dynamics in incest is overdue: the victim and perpetrator have claimed the most attention to the neglect of the spouse and her role. Spouses are often awarded sole custody of incested children and while the perpetrator may be removed

from the home due to legal action, or serve time in a prison setting, the spouse remains in the home. To remove the proximal cause of incest is not sufficient to guarantee the future safety of the victim. Spousal dynamics need examination and attention to prevent further, subsequent re-incesting of the victim, or a perpetuation of the dynamics that could lead to younger siblings becoming victimized.